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ABSTRACT

A 1986 study was designed to obtain feedback from members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the Province of Manitoba on the information they receive from the University of Manitoba and ways in which the university could keep them better informed. Interviews were done with 47 of the 57 MLAs. Findings indicated the following: the University of Manitoba is not doing a particularly good job of keeping MLAs informed of its interests and concerns; 47% of those interviewed are dissatisfied with the level and types of information they are receiving from the university; 74% would like to receive additional information. Three recurring themes were: (1) legislators place a high value on secondary relations (the unofficial, less formal contacts between government officials and university personnel); (2) institutions should proceed slowly and cautiously in their attempts to improve university-government relations; and (3) the University needs a more positive approach to selling itself. An appendix lists interview guidelines. Contains 11 references. (SM)

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KEEPING LEGISLATORS INFORMED:

A STUDY OF FEEDBACK FROM LEGISLATORS ON INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

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Higher Education Group

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (A.S.H.E.) in Atlanta: November, 1989.

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The relationship between higher education and government has been described as a partnership where "each side is a principal in the joint venture of providing higher and postsecondary education services to students and others" (Hines, 1988, p. 103). The principals must cooperate if the venture is to be successful, and such cooperation implies that each side must communicate its interests and activities to the other. Such a view would also suggest that if the two sides do not communicate, or if one side is not appropriately informed of the interests and activities of the other, then the partnership is flawed and the joint venture itself may be jeopardized.

This paper describes a 1986 study designed to obtain feedback from Members of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Manitoba on the information they received from the University of Manitoba, and on ways in which the University might keep them better informed of its interests and activities[1]. The study represented an attempt to see how well one partner was communicating with the other, and to see if there might be ways of improving the flow of information from one partner to the other.

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CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study of the politics of higher education has traditionally focused on the forces at work in the development of higher education policy by institutions and local or national governments (Hines and Hartman, 1980). Easton's (1965) macro-model of political systems provides a generalized picture of how these forces operate. The political system, in this model, might be seen as a 'black box' receiving demands or inputs from the external environments (p. 32). The system emits policy outputs and feedback to the external environments. Applied to higher education, the model suggests that there is a relationship between inputs to the political system, which would include a variety of environmental factors as well as specific inputs generated by interested parties, and outputs in the form of higher education policy and feedback.

In the pluralist paradigm these inputs take the form of interests expressed through the political behaviour of individuals and groups (Pross, 1986). Government policy is a response to these competing interests. In order to ensure that their interests are considered within the context of the policy-making process, postsecondary institutions must find ways of keeping government legislators informed of these interests on an ongoing basis.

Given this general framework, this study can be seen as an attempt to obtain information on how a specific institution might improve the ways in which it keeps legislators informed of its interests and activities. Within the context of Easton's macro-model, the study is an attempt to obtain feedback from a political

system, the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, on the nature of inputs that are or should be provided to the system by a postsecondary institution, the University of Manitoba.

BACKGROUND

While the federal government plays an active role in certain aspects of Canadian higher education (see Grant, 1984), provincial governments are the primary legislative force in the coordination and regulation of Canadian universities. Provincial governments have assumed a central role in the allocation of operating and capital support, the approval of new programs, and other policy areas (see Campbell, 1985). Canadian universities, generally speaking, have retained autonomous control over admission and enrolment policy, the allocation of resources within the institution, degree requirements, and other internal administrative and academic matters.

Like other provincial governments in Canada, the Province of Manitoba adheres to a parliamentary system of government. In the summer of 1986 the province's Legislative Assembly was composed of 57 members (MLAs) representing specific geographic constituencies. The New Democratic Party had formed a government following a Spring election in which they won 30 of the 57 seats. The new government formed a Cabinet or Executive Council comprised of 20 of its 30 elected members. Government responsibility for all areas of education policy was assigned to a single member of cabinet, the Minister of Education. The Legislative Assembly also included 27

opposition members, 26 of which were members of the Progressive Conservative Party while one member represented the Liberal Party.

Since 1967, an intermediary body, the Universities Grants Commission, has provided advice to the government, represented by the Minister of Education, on higher education policy. Created by an Act of the Legislature, the Commission is composed of nine government-appointed members and makes annual recommendations to the Minister on the level of financial assistance that should be provided to the universities. The government provides funds to the Commission which is then responsible for allocating grants to individual institutions. The Commission must also review and approve any "new or expanded service, facility or program of studies involving moneys at the disposal of the Commission before it may be undertaken and implemented by a university" (Universities Grants Commission, 1988, p. 3).

The Commission provides direct operating and major capital project grants to four university-level institutions. The University of Manitoba, the University of Winnipeg, and Brandon University are ostensively autonomous, degree-granting universities. The College universitaire de Saint-Boniface, a french-language institution, awards degrees through an affiliation arrangement with the University of Manitoba.

Higher education, generally speaking, has not been a major political issue in the province for some time. There are occasional questions in the Legislative Assembly concerning university activities, or government policy for the university sector.

Political parties usually include statements concerning higher education in their election platform, but it is seldom regarded as a pressing concern or an issue of high priority.

The University of Manitoba is the largest degree-granting institution in the province. Of the 16,901 full-time undergraduate students enroled in provincial universities in 1987-88, 12,347 (73%) were enroled at the University of Manitoba. In the same year, all of the graduate programs in the province were either offered by the University of Manitoba directly or through one of four joint masters programs involving the University of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg. The institution also plays a central role in professional education since it is the only institution in the province to offer degree programs in such areas as architecture, dentistry, engineering, law, management, medicine, and pharmacy (University Grants Commission, 1988, pp. 48-51).

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA STUDY

For many years the University of Manitoba maintained a modest communications program designed to keep MLAs informed of University activities. The program included sending MLAs a variety of publications including the University's newspaper, annual report, annual financial report, and special information releases. Each MLA also received a list of graduates from their constituency and was informed of some special events. Members occasionally requested specific information through contact with the institution's University Relations and Information Office or the Office of the

President. Generally speaking, the communications program was informal, ad hoc, and based on the assumption that Members would request any special information that they might need to fulfil their duties.

In addition to this somewhat informal program, the University provided information to the Universities Grants Commission and to the Minister of Education on an ongoing basis, including budget submissions, requests for approval of new programs, and other data and documentation requested by the Commission, the Minister, or government officials. University officials met with, and made presentations to, both parties. The Minister and the Commission attempted to keep other MLAs informed of their activities through distribution of the Commission's annual report, and legislative discussions surrounding the Provincial budget process. The Minister also responded to questions regarding provincial universities, both in and out of the Legislative Assembly.

In 1986 the University of Manitoba initiated a study to determine whether MLAs believed that they were being adequately informed of its activities and to see whether there might be ways of improving the communications program. The author was employed to undertake the project at the invitation of the President. There were at least three reasons why the study was conducted. The first was a general desire, on the part of the University, to ensure that legislators were adequately informed of the institution's activities, interests and concerns. The second was a recognition that there were a large number of new, recently elected Members who

might have new or additional information requirements. Finally, there was at least some anecdotal evidence which suggested that some MLAs were not adequately informed of University activities.

METHODOLOGY

The study was designed to obtain feedback from MLAs concerning their views of the University of Manitoba and the information they receive from the university, with the objective of recommending improvements the university might make to keep MLAs better informed of University activities and concerns. An interview was requested with each of the 57 MLAs or their representatives. Of the 57, 47 were interviewed and arrangements were made to obtain responses from 4 other individuals through meetings with their staff. Data was therefore obtained from 51 or 89% of elected members, including 17 of the 20 members of the Cabinet.

The interviews were conducted between April and August of 1986. Appointments were arranged by telephone, and Members were given an early indication of the questions that would be raised during the meetings. Interviews were structured in accordance with guidelines developed after consultation with university officials. The interview guidelines were composed of eight questions or topics of discussion (see Appendix).

It should be noted that the study did not address the relationship between the institution and the Universities Grants Commission, or the relationship between this body and the provincial legislature. There is little doubt that these relationships play at least some role in the development of higher

education policy within the province, and their omission from the study represents an important limitation.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

1. Assessing the Adequacy of Information Provided by the University

Almost half (24 or 47%) of the MLAs that were interviewed in the study indicated that they were not satisfied with the level and/or types of information provided by the University. Fifteen (29%) indicated that they were satisfied while 12 (24%), primarily new MLAs, declined to comment. In terms of the 17 Cabinet members that were interviewed, 8 (47%) were not satisfied, 7 (41%) were satisfied, and 2 (12%) declined to comment.

Individuals who felt that the current information program was adequate indicated that they had enough information to fulfil their duties as legislators. A large number of these individuals suggested that they knew where to go to obtain additional information as required. Many had established contact with senior officials or had informal relationships with University personnel.

Members who were dissatisfied generally asserted that the University should be providing additional types of information. Some suggested that the information currently provided by the University was not particularly relevant to their work, or that the documentation addressed policy matters and used acronyms and specialized terminology that they were not familiar with. Some respondents indicated that they did not know how to obtain

additional information from the University and were reluctant to call the Office of the President to receive what one member referred to as "answers to very simple questions that come across my desk."

Many members also commented on the specific documents that they received from the University. The list of recent graduates in each constituency was highly praised. In 80% of the interviews it was the first piece of information that members' recalled receiving from the University. It gave them the opportunity to contact constituents who had accomplished an important goal. Most MLAs spent at least some time reading the University's newspaper, the Bulletin, and most found something of value in it. Two individuals stressed the importance of the Bulletin's events listing since they occasionally attended public lectures and seminars at the University. While very few members had read the University's Annual Financial Report, most viewed it as an important resource document. Some members also praised the President's Letter and Annual Report, essentially because these documents provided concise statements of particular University problems or initiatives.

2. Requests for Additional Information

MLAs were asked whether they would like to receive additional information from the University. Thirty-seven (74%) of those interviewed responded in the affirmative and made a total of 82 requests for additional information. The types of information requested by MLAs varied considerably, ranging from detailed

information on research projects in specific disciplines to information on University sporting events.

Of the 82 requests for information, 62 might be categorized under four general topic areas: university research activities (21), funding (16), university programs (14), and the student body (11). Members wanted to know more about the number and types of research projects that were taking place. While many of these requests were quite general in nature, such as "I'd like to learn more about the kinds of research that professors are doing", a number were extremely specific and related to areas of government policy. Requests for information on funding often involved process-related questions such as how the University estimated future resource needs and how it made budgetary decisions concerning the allocation of available resources. Members were interested in learning more about the variety of programs offered by the institution including program objectives and requirements. Members also wanted to learn more about the student body in demographic terms, including data related to gender, family income, and the participation of minority groups. The remaining 20 requests for information were often extremely specific and requested by only one individual.

Most requests for information corresponded to the MLA's area of legislative work, including the members' Cabinet/shadow cabinet or committee assignments, or to areas of concern within their constituency. MLAs requested information on university research activities which involved these areas of interest, and data on the

university's activities in the member's constituency. Other requests for information appeared to stem from the rather diverse personal interests of interviewees, including requests for details of sporting events, musical presentations, and the effectiveness of teleconferencing as a teaching tool.

While 74% of respondents indicated that they would like to receive additional information, many also indicated that they were already receiving too much documentation from a variety of sources. They wanted any new information provided by the University to be in summary form. They did not want to be deluged with publications or correspondence that were not directly relevant to their work or personal interests. The University's information program should recognize the needs of individual MLAs, but it should also attempt to serve those needs without demanding much additional time from members.

3. Keeping Legislators Informed: Three Themes

MLAs provided a number of specific suggestions on the ways in which the University might keep them informed and provide input to the political system. Suggestions for improving contact included an annual "state of the university" presentation to each party caucus, tours of the University or of specific units or facilities within the University, and University-sponsored workshops or seminars of topics of interest to MLAs. Many of these suggestions and discussions revealed three common themes concerning an approach to improving the University/legislature relationship through an

improved communications program: moving slowly, the importance of secondary relations, and a more 'positive' approach.

3.1 Moving Slowly

While the majority of MLAs suggested that there were ways of improving and increasing contact between the University and the legislature, many also cautioned that there were inherent dangers in moving too quickly. Three types of potential problems were discussed.

The first was based on a concern that the University might not appreciate the time constraints of individual MLAs. Increased contact between the University and individual legislators was generally encouraged, but often with the caveat that it might be difficult to "find the time". Some members were very concerned about the possibility of being overwhelmed with reports that they did not have the time to read or with social invitations that they could not accept. Taken to the extreme, such activities might be viewed as an inappropriate use of scarce public resources.

The second potential problem stemmed from the perception of at least some MLAs that at certain times 'ignorance is bliss'. The more that legislators know about the University the more the institution may become the subject of public debate. Most MLAs viewed the University as a step away from the political process, a view that is reinforced by the existence of the Universities Grants Commission. One of the perceived dangers of improving the University/legislature relationship is the possibility of increased

politicization, of shortening the distance between the two parties. While a number of legislators welcomed such a move, others warned that increased politicization might have some impact on real or perceived institutional autonomy.

The third danger, closely related to the second, was that increased contact might endanger the perception of the University as an objective, non-partisan institution. One member described a scenario in which the University shares all of its problems and concerns with a member of an opposition party. The MLA might raise these concerns in the legislature and successfully argue for increased funding. However, this new level of cooperation might be viewed as partisan and the government of the day may react in a very different manner.

The University, it was suggested, must move slowly and cautiously when entering the political arena. Potential problems can be avoided if the University moves ahead by taking small steps and monitoring the response to any new initiatives.

3.2 The Importance of Secondary Relations

Sirluck, in an essay on university presidents and politicians (1977), defined two different types of university-government relations: primary and secondary. Primary relations usually involve the university president and those within government who have responsibility for higher education policy. These are the formal relationships which appear on organizational charts describing the structure of the public policy process for higher education.

While there were very few comments from MLAs concerning the structure of these primary relations, many stressed the importance of developing or improving what Sirluck referred to as secondary relations, the varied and often less-formal contact between university personnel and government officials which does not directly involve higher education policy. Such relations would include, for example, the ongoing contact between a Dean of Medicine and government officials responsible for health care policy, or the employment of an economics professor as a consultant to provide assistance with the development of a government budget.

Many members expressed an interest in identifying certain types of individuals within the university, often described as "experts", who might be able to assist the member with a specific constituency-based problem, or provide research data related to a policy area they were particularly interested in. While most MLAs talked about this need in general terms, a few provided specific examples. One described an environmental problem in the member's constituency and wanted to find a university 'expert' who was familiar with this type of problem. One member wanted to identify an "objective expert" who had knowledge and experience related to a specific type of urban renewal program. In both cases MLAs wanted to find ways of utilizing what they perceived to be politically-neutral expertise. The problem, from their perspective, was one of identifying and accessing this expertise.

Most Cabinet members talked about the important relationships or contacts that they had developed with relevant University units

or personnel. Some faculty members acted as consultants on certain policy matters. Faculty were involved in government-sponsored research programs, and a number were appointed to government committees and task forces. Cabinet members also talked about the multitude of relationships that existed between government departments and university units. They emphasized a need to strengthen, and increase the number of, these secondary relationships.

In most cases these relationships, when discussed, were seen as beneficial to both sides. While a few members only talked about a one-way flow of information emanating from the university "expert", many described the benefits of sharing data, of eliminating duplicate research efforts conducted by government agencies and university personnel, of the potential for new research contracts or consulting arrangements, of finding solutions to University problems, or of other ways in which these relationships help the University. "We might be able to help," one member said, "but you have to tell us what you are doing. We need to identify who is doing research that we are interested in within the University."

3.3 A Positive Approach

In discussions concerning ways in which the University might keep legislators better informed, a number of MLAs indicated that much of what they read about the University in newspapers, or heard about the institution through other sources, was what one member

referred to as "negative information". While most respondents suggested that the institution was "doing a good job" or "was a valuable resource", many also commented that much of what they heard about the University of Manitoba concerned its problems. A number commented on news reports about government underfunding, overcrowding, or reductions in the number of faculty in certain programs. One member stated that he knew very little about the University except that "you want more money."

A general theme, interwoven through many of the interviews, was that legislators wanted to receive additional information on the institution's successes and accomplishments. It was suggested that the University had to do a better job at "selling" itself, both to legislators and to the general public. The University, it was suggested, had to adopt a more positive approach to its relationship with government. There were a number of variations to this theme.

Three members talked about the need to identify the role of the institution within the province. The perception was that the institution often articulated its goals and objectives without acknowledging its relationship to the broader society. They did not suggest that these goals or objectives were inappropriate, in fact they did not even know if such documents existed, but felt that the University had to more clearly articulate its role, and in doing so its relevancy, to the Province of Manitoba.

Several members were critical of what they perceived to be a 'negative' public relations approach which emphasized University

underfunding and decline. One member accused the University of "crying wolf". Another suggested that it was difficult to find additional money for an institution that only talked about its problems. A third member discussed the temptation to "call your bluff", to see whether a decrease in provincial funding to universities would have the impact that the universities had said it would.

Seven members suggested that the University had to do a better job at identifying and publically articulating its accomplishments. The University should "sell itself", "promote itself", "do good and let other people know that you are doing it", "convince citizens that they are making a good investment", and publish "success stories". It was far easier for legislators to support a university, they argued, if the institution received wide public support or if they could point to its great accomplishments. One member suggested that a politician can earn more 'political points' from supporting a positive cause than from attempting to rectify a problem or concern.

This theme was particularly evident in discussions of university activities in each constituency. Only 12 members were aware of any work that the University was doing in their riding, and yet the institution sponsored programs, research projects, and services in many if not all constituencies. Not surprisingly, all members were extremely interested in obtaining this information. It would provide them with positive information that demonstrates the University's relevancy to their constituency.

Members did not suggest that the University should stop articulating its problems or concerns. Instead it was suggested that legislators wanted and needed to know more about the institution's accomplishments, and this positive image of the University should be used as a context or backdrop for discussions of how the University's problems might be addressed by the legislature. Politicians should be constantly reminded that the University is fulfilling a role that is relevant and beneficial to the citizens of the province.

FOLLOW-UP

Data from this study was used to improve the University of Manitoba's information program for legislators (University of Manitoba, 1986; Pierre, 1987). A member of the University Information and Relations Office was designated Government Liaison Officer, and this individual has assumed responsibility for keeping legislators informed of university activities, maintaining individualized contact with legislators and other officials, encouraging secondary relations where appropriate, and for monitoring the information program. Many of the general questions raised by legislators during interviews were addressed through the creation and distribution of a new handbook, written especially for legislators and other officials. The Government Liaison Officer also produces a periodic publication called Digest, a one or two page summary of University activities, and maintains and distributes information on University activities in each provincial

constituency.

Whether MLAs are better informed of University interests as a result of these innovations is difficult to determine at this time. The position of Government Liaison Officer has existed for only two years, and more time will be required before specific changes can be evaluated, especially in a situation where the University has adopted a "go slow" approach. There is at least some anecdotal evidence, however, suggesting that the changes have been well received by legislators (Pierre, 1987; Unrau, 1988).

CONCLUSIONS

The study suggests that the University of Manitoba was not doing a particularly good job at keeping MLAs informed of its interests and concerns. 47% of those interviewed were dissatisfied with the level and types of information they were receiving from the University. 74% indicated that they would like to receive additional information, and they made 82 individual information requests. Discussions concerning ways in which the University might improve its information program revealed three common themes: that the University should move slowly in its attempts to improve relations, that secondary relations should be strengthened, and that the University should present its case in a more positive fashion.

The study resulted in a number of changes to the University of Manitoba's government relations activities, and the development

of an approach based, in part, on the three themes described above. A new Government Relations Office attempts to keep legislators informed of university activities, and monitors university-government relations.

While the generalizability of the study findings to other postsecondary institutions and to other political environments is extremely limited, there are a number of conclusions which emerge from this specific case that should be considered by those who study university-government relations. The first and perhaps the most obvious conclusion is that the study itself represented a useful exercise. It represented a systematic attempt to obtain feedback from legislators and to evaluate the ways in which the institution provided input to one component of the political system. It led to changes in the way the university approached this relationship, though there is nothing more than anecdotal evidence to suggest that these changes represent successful improvements to university-government relationships. The very fact that the study took place indicated to legislators that the University was interested in keeping them informed. Universities should review their government relations activities to see whether there are appropriate feedback mechanisms, and regularly evaluate the ways in which these activities are perceived by those within the political system.

This study found that legislators placed a high value on what Sirluck (1977) refers to as secondary relations, and yet the study of university-government relations has tended to focus on those

forces which have a direct impact only on higher education policy. This finding suggests that there may be a plethora of university-government relationships which are, generally speaking, ignored by the literature, but which may have an indirect impact on government policy. The notion certainly warrants additional study.

The study findings suggest that institutions should proceed slowly and cautiously in their attempts to improve university-government relations. They should be cognizant of such potential problems as increased politicization or perceptions of political partisanship.

Finally, institutions should review the ways in which they express their interests as inputs to the political process. The study suggests that there may be benefits to assuming a more positive approach, to expressing their problems and concerns within a context of institutional accomplishment and success. Whether such an approach would actually improve the relationship or make legislators more receptive to higher education concerns is extremely difficult to predict, but "a spoonful of sugar" might make higher education interests more palatable as inputs to the political system.

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APPENDIX

Interview Guidelines

1. Are MLAs satisfied with the present flow of information? Do they receive enough information about the University?

2. Determine the types of information which MLAs would like to have.

3. Ascertain whether they would be interested in touring the University and in what format.

4. Assessment of how the University could improve communications with MLAs.

5. Is the MLA aware of any University activities that take place in their constituency? Impressions? If they are not aware of any University activities then would they be interested in receiving information on activities presently taking place in their constituency?

6. Are there constituency related problems, features, or issues that might benefit from some form of University assistance?

7. Are there any special programs or workshops that the University might organize that would be of assistance to the MLA?

8. Ascertain whether they or their children have attended the University of Manitoba?